

## EPISTEMIC TRUST AND LIBERAL JUSTIFICATION

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### 1. Introduction

Reason-giving has arguably become the central concern of liberalism.<sup>1</sup> A vast portion of contemporary liberal theorists endorse some version of the view that our political arrangements and uses of power must be justifiable to all citizens by good reasons.<sup>2</sup> Call this the *liberal principle of justification* (LPJ). The motivation for LPJ has normally been given in moral terms. The obligation to provide good reasons to a universal audience – or at any rate to have good reasons available in principle – derives from an equal respect for the autonomy of all persons as rational beings. Reason-giving is seen as an essential route to securing free consent, and free

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<sup>1</sup> For valuable feedback I am grateful to Akeel Bilgrami, Alvin Goldman, Philip Kitcher, Joseph Raz, Daniel Viehoff, and several anonymous reviewers. I also benefited from an audience at the 2009 Workshop on the Epistemic Benefits of Free Speech and Openness at the University of Copenhagen, the members of Alvin Goldman’s Social Epistemology Seminar at Rutgers University, and an audience of my colleagues at Saint Olaf College. Portions of this paper, and especially Section Four, draw on Chapter Three of my Ph.D. thesis, “The Scientific Public: Inquiry in Democratic Society” (Columbia University, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Some prominent variations on the theme are Cohen 1989, Habermas 1996, Larmore 1987, Rawls 1993, Waldron 1987.

consent is understood to be essential to the legitimacy of state action.<sup>3</sup> That is a crude sketch, at any rate, of how the argument goes.

Although the moral case for LPJ is important, I am interested in a different sort of rationale for this influential idea. The rationale is epistemic in nature insofar as it concerns, broadly speaking, the tendency of justificatory activity to advance the acceptance of true beliefs and the rejection of false beliefs. In its standard form, the essence of the epistemic rationale is as follows: when citizens engage in the practice of defending their views to others by appeal to reasons, they will be tested by exposure to new evidence and arguments. Their awareness of new evidence and arguments will normally provide them with an improved basis for rejecting false beliefs, accepting new true beliefs, and supporting existing true beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I try to develop a new kind of epistemic rationale for LPJ. I argue that the distinctly liberal commitment to constant and ostentatious reason-giving underlies the possibility of a vital kind of epistemic trust in the political context. Though there is now a large literature on the relationship between government and trust,<sup>5</sup> epistemic trust, as a distinct topic, has received little treatment in the context of political theory.<sup>6</sup> Epistemic trust is essential to democratic governance because as citizens we can only make informed decisions by relying on the claims of moral, scientific, and practical authorities around us. We must also rely heavily on the say-so of others about what matters to them, and about the effects of various policies on their important

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<sup>3</sup> Macedo 1990, Rawls 1993, Waldron 1987

<sup>4</sup> Mill 2002, Dewey 1954, Misak 2000, Talisse 2009

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Braithwaite and Levi 1998, Hardin 2002, Uslander 2002, Warren 1999.

<sup>6</sup> The crucial exception of which I am aware is Buchanan 2004.

projects. In these respects, our success as a democratic political community depends on our ability to cultivate diverse areas of expertise and rely on one another's knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, I defend the view that, under the normal circumstances of pluralistic political deliberation (I say more on this below), LPJ is a necessary condition for warranted epistemic trust, and therefore a necessary condition for healthy public inquiry about politically significant questions.<sup>8</sup> My thesis is therefore normative rather than empirical. That is, my principal argument concerns the general institutional and social conditions under which certain forms of epistemic cooperation are epistemically appropriate, rather than the social and psychological conditions which actually tend to induce such cooperation. I argue that rational epistemic trust is uniquely fragile in the political context in light of both the radical inclusiveness of the relevant epistemic community (i.e., everyone who participates in the political process) and the conflicting interests bound up in policy debate. Thus, LPJ should be understood as a vital response to the special epistemic challenges that the political context poses.

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<sup>7</sup> Baurmann and Brennan 2009, Buchanan 2004, Fuerstein 2008, Ober 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Buchanan 2004 also defends liberalism in terms of its contribution to epistemically valuable trust. Buchanan's approach, however, differs in two important respects from my own: First, Buchanan's discussion concerns social epistemology in general, as opposed to the specific context of political deliberation. In what follows, I assess the unique challenges posed by the latter and assess the virtues of liberalism in response. Second, Buchanan's analysis is not focused on liberalism's commitment to universal justification, pursuing, instead, its commitments to free speech, meritocracy, and egalitarianism. This difference is significant for reasons that will be explicitly addressed in Section Six.

## 2. Epistemology in the Political Domain

I will suppose that epistemic activity is minimally defined by a concern with fidelity to how things are, as opposed to how inquirers would like them to be, or actually take them to be, or believe they ought to be. It is not important in this context that we take a fine-grained view about what exactly that kind of “fidelity” involves, but I will rely on what I take to be the most straightforward interpretation: the principal epistemic aims are the adoption of true beliefs and the rejection of false beliefs, and the characteristic terms of epistemic appraisal – warrant, justification, rationality, etc. – specify practices that relate in an essential way to success in those aims.

No conception of responsible political decision-making can do without some substantial regard for the epistemic quality of the beliefs that support citizens’ use of political power. If citizens endorse candidate A based on wildly false premises, fallacious inferences, or ignorance of important information, then these facts about the basis for their endorsement ought to bear on our assessment of a decision in A’s favor. They bear on our assessment of the decision’s political legitimacy, insofar as a free exercise of political power requires some capacity to assess competently the options at hand. And they bear on our assessment of the decision’s moral justification, insofar as democratic governments aim, not merely to achieve fair decision procedures, but also to achieve policy outcomes that justly serve the interests of a diverse citizenry.<sup>9</sup> Achieving just and effective policy outcomes depends, not merely on how inputs to the decision procedure are tallied; it also depends on whether the inputs are generated in an epistemically responsible matter. Systematic delusion, misinformation, ignorance of vital facts, and unwarranted inference are all enemies of governance worth wanting or recommending.

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson 2006, Estlund 2008

These considerations do not establish that normative policy beliefs – e.g., “tax rates on the poor ought to be lowered,” or “gun controls should be stricter” – have a truth value, or that there exists some independent standard of correctness against which to assess them.<sup>10</sup> However, they do establish the vital role of epistemic goals and criteria in our political lives. Specifically, these considerations show that our normative policy beliefs are at least susceptible of indirect epistemic assessment by reference to the beliefs that are invoked to justify them. That is, at any rate, an assumption that will underlie the discussion below.

Earlier, I noted that citizens must rely on testimony from a broad range of sources in order to make informed decisions about how to use their political powers. Thus, as democratic citizens, we can only have epistemically reliable beliefs about politically significant matters by relying on the knowledge of others. To have *epistemic trust* in a speaker is to be disposed to accept her claims because of the belief that the speaker is sufficiently epistemically reliable, where reliability concerns both the epistemic *competence* of the speaker – the likelihood that her beliefs in some domain are true – and her *sincerity* – the likelihood that she will represent what she believes accurately.<sup>11</sup> So, as democratic citizens, we are epistemically interdependent in the respect that our epistemic status on politically significant issues is contingent on the knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> The idea that there is a standard of correctness that is independent of the actual outcomes of political decision procedures is a defining feature of “epistemic democracy” in its standard form, developed principally in Cohen 1986, Estlund 2008. I thus depart from epistemic democrats in emphasizing epistemological concerns in politics without insisting on the need for some such independent standard.

<sup>11</sup> My use of the term “sincerity” draws loosely on the terminology in Williams 2002.

of others and our ability to trust them in accepting it. In this respect, politics is like more or less any other substantial epistemic domain.

But there is a second way in which democratic citizens are epistemically interdependent, one that distinguishes the democratic context from others in which we divide our epistemic labors. In democracies, the course of government action generally depends, not on the beliefs of one or a few people about political matters, but rather on the beliefs of massive collections of individuals about such matters. This is true, first, because democracies employ universal, majoritarian voting procedures, in effect surveying the entire population for their opinion on important political questions. It is also true, however, in virtue of the many indirect channels through which democratic citizens influence government action: lobbying, editorializing, protesting, and so forth. The fact that influence over decision-making is so widely distributed means that democratic decision-making will only reliably go well when a sufficiently large portion of the population is epistemically capable on political matters. Whereas the first form of epistemic interdependence concerns our ability to achieve reliability by learning from others, this latter form of epistemic interdependence concerns the practical consequences, for us, of others' reliability or lack thereof. It concerns the fact, in particular, that what the government does for and to us is a function of the epistemic status of others' beliefs. In contrast to the first kind of interdependence, the second type provides even a perfectly knowledgeable individual with reason for concern about others' ignorance. It is notable in this respect that political communities, and in particular liberal democratic political communities, are radically inclusive in a way that no other sort of epistemic community is. Scientific communities, for example, tightly regulate their membership by credentials and norms that are indicative of epistemic merit. Political communities, in contrast, are places in which membership is regulated only by the basic

standards of citizenship. Citizens must therefore depend epistemically on a community whose membership is not governed by any epistemically significant criteria. Call this the *radical epistemic inclusiveness* of liberal democracies.

Because citizens of liberal democracies are epistemically interdependent in the two respects just described, liberal democratic societies, and individual citizens within them, have a compelling interest in developing healthy social institutions and practices that sustain an ongoing, inclusive, and vigorous exchange of knowledge. But though a robust social-epistemic exchange is essential for good governance, I will argue that there are significant and unusual kinds of risks for individuals attendant to good-faith participation in such an exchange. It is these risks, I contend, that pose a special kind of problem for social epistemology in the democratic context. And it is the capacity of liberalism to manage that problem that constitutes one of its critical epistemic virtues. Before proceeding further, however, let us get clearer about the ideal of LPJ.

### **3. The Liberal Principle of Justification (Briefly Interpreted)**

As I understand it, LPJ requires at least the following. As citizens, we must:

- (a) present our reasons for political action in the public forum for all to assess, where this entails aiming to reach the broadest possible audience;
- (b) respond to the objections presented in that forum;
- (c) modify our political actions in a way that is sensitive to the results of our public deliberations.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some representative statements of these conditions are in Cohen 1989, Dryzek 2000, Gutmann and Thompson 1996, Habermas 1996, Larmore 1987, Richardson 2002.

I assume that the obligation to give reasons is not a purely counterfactual ideal; that is, LPJ implies an obligation<sup>13</sup> to subject one's beliefs to the actual scrutiny of others in the public forum, and to actively respond to the objections of others so long as they pass some modest threshold of competency and good faith. I also assume that the obligations of liberal justification extend beyond foundational constitutional concerns to encompass daily policy issues in education, healthcare, and so forth. The obligation to engage in a responsible give and take of reasons applies whenever the use of political power is contentious and is likely to have a significant impact on the lives of others.

I take the above to be a plausible encapsulation of at least part of what liberal theorists have in mind when they talk about justification, particularly deliberative democrats, but the argument that I give for the epistemic value of LPJ should rise or fall independently of whether it properly accords with liberal doctrine, or what others have said about liberal doctrine. In any case, I do not have the space here to endeavor a meaningful defense of LPJ *qua* interpretation of liberalism.

As noted above, the traditional concern of those who defend LPJ is the moral legitimacy of political actions rather than the epistemic status of political beliefs. As a result, the status of epistemic concerns in most discussions of liberal justification is somewhat unclear. On the one hand, justification is itself a notion that has inherently epistemic features, and this point is reflected in liberals' attention to the rationality and corrigibility of those to whom justification is owed and, in some cases, to the availability of relevant information. On the other hand, liberal

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<sup>13</sup> The precise sense and strength of the obligation in this context is subject to some interpretation, but nothing that follows should turn on that interpretation. For my purposes, "obligation" here implies at least a strong moral ought.

constraints on political debate rarely include any strongly truth-oriented criteria of reasoning or evidence, and the stated aim of political debate is ultimately mutual acceptance rather than the endorsement of truth.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of how we finesse these issues, it seems to me that no viable conception of liberal justification can do without some meaningful epistemic constraints on deliberation for reasons sketched out in Section Two. So my working assumption is that however precisely we understand the idea of justification involved in LPJ, it involves some substantial fidelity to epistemic standards in the sense described above. That is, it is not exclusively a matter of convincing others of something; it is a matter of convincing them in a way that respects at least basic epistemic constraints on patterns of inference, quality of evidence, and so forth. This is important because I aim to show below that LPJ has certain kinds of important benefits with respect to epistemically responsible belief, even if epistemically responsible belief is not the defining aim of LPJ's constitutive practices. The fact that LPJ involves these basic epistemic requirements is what makes it plausible that it does, in fact, yield meaningful epistemic benefits. Thus, to conditions (a)-(c) above, I will add:

- (d) (as citizens, we must): execute (a), (b), and (c) in a way that respects at least basic epistemic constraints on reasoning, evidence, and belief.

The requirements of LPJ should not be taken to imply the fatally utopian idea that every single citizen should literally seek to justify every single use of her political power to every other citizen. Rather, on my understanding, they provide a broad, regulative framework of norms that admits of many forms of implementation, contingent on the empirical insights of sociology and psychology as well as the practical constraints of large, geographically dispersed societies. Thus, for one thing, I understand the practice of reason-giving as socially and chronologically

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<sup>14</sup> Gaus 1996, however, provides a notably epistemic take on liberal justification.

dispersed.<sup>15</sup> The idea of a universal exchange of reasons is the idea that the many different social *perspectives* that bear on any issue are represented over time, by diverse agents, in inclusive public forums – newspapers, town hall meetings, political debates, the internet, legislative halls, etc. – by appeal to reasons and are widely contested there by appeal to reasons. Realistically, participation in and/or attention to these debates should be substantial enough across the population that the process actively draws out and represents the broadest possible range of concerns and, at the same time, engages a substantial proportion of individual minds in active reflection. At the same time, I take the ideal to be compatible with the necessity, in certain cases, for government secrecy or expert debate behind closed doors.<sup>16</sup> LPJ implies a strongly public form of discourse, and a strong presumption in favor of the disclosure of reasons and information, but it need not be absolutist in these respects. Likewise, any proponent of ongoing social justification must acknowledge the importance of institutional design to address the various ways in which public deliberation can go awry.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. The Threat of Epistemic Alienation

With a working understanding of LPJ now in hand, let us return to the main thread. I indicated earlier that there are distinctive risks that attend to political deliberation, and turn now to consider them and their consequences in detail. The first risk that citizens encounter when participating in a social exchange of knowledge is that of *incompetence*. The asymmetric

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<sup>15</sup> See Goodin 2008 on this point and some relevant possibilities for institutional design.

<sup>16</sup> Chambers 2004

<sup>17</sup> For a good overview of the relevant social science, see Delli Carpini et al. 2004, Ryfe 2005, Sunstein 2005, Thompson 2008.

distribution of vital knowledge requires individuals to rely on the knowledge of others, as we have noted. The result, however, is frequently a dangerous amplification of local mistakes, as when experts draw false conclusions about the military capabilities of a foreign power, the economic benefits of trade barriers, or the safety of new food ingredients. Similarly, when citizens rely on demagogical figures of moral or social authority the costs to their character, and to the development of their personal aspirations and relationships, can be quite steep.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, many of the political subgroups involved in deliberation will be able to exploit epistemic asymmetries by misleading others or withholding information for selfish gain. This introduces a second kind of risk, that is, the risk of *insincerity*. When the oil industry cooks its financial books, when power companies misrepresent the health threat posed by a new plant, or when pharmaceutical companies game the scientific studies of their products, they take advantage of precisely this kind of asymmetry. They trade on their epistemic authority – about the financial dynamics of oil production, the pollution caused by power plants, or the safety of new drugs – to effect selfish gain. The willingness of others to accept their claims in good faith then becomes the basis for their own exploitation in the political process, whether through the approval of oil-industry tax breaks, a smog-spewing electrical plant, or dangerous pills.

All epistemological contexts in which we must rely on the knowledge of others introduce risks of both these types. Political deliberation, however, heightens these risks in virtue of four crucial features:

(i) *High Stakes*: The moral stakes involved are exceptionally high. In political decisions, the welfare of large numbers of individuals is in play, as are massive amounts of human and financial resources.

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<sup>18</sup> Buchanan 2004

(ii) *Complexity*: The heterogeneity and difficulty of the knowledge problems that bear on governance are unparalleled. Producing epistemically responsible policy requires, not only answering a range of deep moral questions about justice and liberty, but also attending to a dynamically interactive set of issues in economics, engineering, diplomacy, warfare, education, healthcare, and so forth, all while attending to the interests of a large and pluralistic citizenry.

(iii) *Conflicting Values*: The set of individual interests and values that are at stake in the outcomes of political decision-making are extremely diverse and frequently conflicting. Citizens must therefore cooperate in an epistemic endeavor, the outcome of which will often affect them in a highly differential manner.

(iv) *Bad Incentives*: Individuals have a substantial capacity to benefit themselves directly by misrepresenting the truth to others. This point applies in many other social-epistemic contexts as well, but is highly significant in the political context in virtue of the relative directness with which beliefs translate into action (in the form of government policy). In democracies, disseminating falsehoods that support your narrow interests is an enormously efficient way of advancing those interests at others' expense.

These four conditions make trust an enormously risky proposition because they introduce a substantial probability of incompetence (“difficulty”), and create strong incentives for insincerity (“conflicting values” and “bad incentives”), under circumstances in which the costs of accepting false beliefs are extremely high (“high stakes”). As a purely psychological fact, such risks ought to make mutual skepticism the likely default on many important political issues. More important, however, such risks suggest that a strong degree of skepticism is a rational default stance towards one's fellow citizens.<sup>19</sup> This constitutes an important difference between

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<sup>19</sup> Offe 1999

political deliberation and the sorts of mundane or “default” testimonial situations (e.g., asking for the time) that have sometimes featured prominently in recent discussions of testimony.<sup>20</sup>

Because substantial testimonial skepticism is rationally appropriate in the political context, the prospect of a healthy social-epistemic exchange depends on two tightly interrelated challenges:

The first challenge is creating a citizenry with the sorts of capacities and dispositions that tend to make them epistemically reliable. This challenge is widely appreciated among those interested in the epistemic aspects of liberal democracy. The classic Millian argument that liberalism is valuable because a free and inclusive exchange of ideas enhances the warrant for our beliefs is an argument that addresses this challenge.<sup>21</sup> So too does the argument that we are obligated in democratic deliberation to adopt a substantial measure of epistemic humility and fallibilism.<sup>22</sup>

The second challenge is fostering the requisite confidence among the citizenry of others’ epistemic reliability, i.e., epistemic trust. To see the full significance of epistemic trust in the political context, consider the case of global warming. In spite of a durable scientific consensus on the matter, it has been a staple of American conservative commentary to suggest that “the jury is still out” on human contributions to warming or, in some cases, that the global warming

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Burge 1993, Faulkner 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Mill 2002

<sup>22</sup> Misak 2000, Talisse 2009

phenomenon is some sort of mass delusion or elaborate hoax.<sup>23</sup> Why? We might want to diagnose this scenario by pointing to various forms of epistemic unreliability: epistemic incompetence, perhaps, in the interpretation of available data, or insincerity, perhaps, in disingenuous professions of skepticism. Yet, whatever the truth to these accusations, such behavior is in part the consequence of an abiding perception among some that the environmental science establishment is overrun by leftists eager to advance a narrow political agenda.<sup>24</sup> That perception, in turn, undermines confidence in the credibility of the scientific community among large portions of the population, and encourages an intransigent resistance to the policy interventions that global warming requires. Perversely, that failure of confidence forces scientists into the awkward stance of a closed and unflinchingly unified community.<sup>25</sup> When even the slightest admission of doubt on warming trends is demagogically exploited by industry-funded

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<sup>23</sup> For a particularly good illustration of this perspective, see the floor speeches on global warming of American Senator James Inhofe, at <http://inhofe.senate.gov/pressreleases/content-floorspeeches.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Conservative skeptics of global warming thus frequently suggest that the issue provides an ideal pretense for increased state control of economies, and for an insidious expansion of the powers of international institutions of governance.

<sup>25</sup> The 2009 brouhaha surrounding the private email exchanges of a number of climate scientists, in which they discuss whether particular bits of climate data ought to be released publicly, as well as their use of “tricks” in the representation of some data, seems to me an ideal illustration of this point. Climate skeptics immediately pounced on these emails as evidence of a grand conspiracy.

researchers to shill for the conservative position,<sup>26</sup> the kind of candor and open debate that are hallmarks of good scientific inquiry become liabilities in the advancement of epistemically good policy.

I submit that if we want to understand this kind of breakdown, we cannot look narrowly at the epistemic reliability of the parties involved. Rather, we must take into view an insidious feedback loop wherein (perceived) differences in political value – on the environment, private property, the economy, etc. – undermine epistemic trust which in turn fuels unreliable behavior, which in turn further undermines trust, and so forth. In this respect, the challenge faced by our political community takes on the character of an assurance problem. In the classic prisoner’s dilemma, the fate of the prisoners is a function of at least two things: first, their independent willingness not to betray one another and, second, their confidence in the other’s willingness not to betray them.<sup>27</sup> Assuming that rationality implies at least moderate self-interest, failures of confidence make defection rational even if the prisoners are disposed by default to cooperate with one another. Likewise, the problem presented by distrust in the political context is not only that, when citizens do not trust reliable sources of knowledge, they will have fewer valuable true beliefs and more harmful false beliefs than they otherwise would have. The problem is that distrust and reliability are dynamically interactive: distrust begets unreliability which begets further distrust, etc. Crucially, as in prisoner’s dilemmas, this antisocial cascade occurs as a function of the rational behavior of agents who might otherwise be disposed to act responsibly. Under conditions in which citizens reasonably believe their own good faith will be exploited by

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the notorious (and now defunct) “Global Climate Coalition.”

<sup>27</sup> Faulkner 2007, Williams 2002, and Blais 1987 also highlight the game-theoretical character of epistemic trust relations.

others, it is often rational to withdraw from responsible inquiry through deliberate misrepresentation and open dogmatism.

To put a name on this phenomenon, let us say that *epistemic alienation* occurs when some members within the epistemic community are motivated to intentional epistemic unreliability by the perception that other members of the epistemic community are unreliable in ways harmful to their interests. Epistemic alienation is *warranted* when the attribution of unreliability is accurate, and *unwarranted* when it is inaccurate. In the paradigm case, members of Group A believes that members of Group B are ignoring or misrepresenting epistemic considerations which, if properly weighted, would have policy implications more consistent with policies that support the members of Group A's values. Moreover, the members of Group A think that the cause of the misrepresentation is some form of overt or unconscious political bias. As a result, the members of Group A engage in obfuscation, misrepresentation, or dogmatic behavior in support of epistemic considerations that favor its values. Groups here are to be defined by reference to a cluster of values that their members see as uniting them with respect to some policy issue or issues, as in the case of the "environmentalist," "feminist," "pro-life," or "family values," agendas, for example. The members of such groups do not necessarily act in concert or through any systematic organization, though there are typically prominent individuals or institutions that they endorse as representing them (as in the case, for example, of Planned Parenthood and the pro-choice movement in the U.S., or Focus on the Family and the family values movement in the U.S.).

The participation of many "climate skeptics" in the public debate about global warming, in my view, provides a paradigmatic example of unwarranted epistemic alienation. Another prominent contemporary example is the response of many to President Obama's recent proposals

for healthcare reform in the United States as in, for example, the widely promoted claim that Obama's plan would have instituted "death panels," in which government officials would evaluate the worthiness of older Americans for healthcare based on assessments of their social productivity.<sup>28</sup> Yet another would be the response of many opponents to the proposed legalization of same-sex marriage. Prominent in the public arguments against same-sex marriage have been a number of either discredited or unsubstantiated empirical claims, including, for example, the claim that the legalization of same-sex marriage would tend to decrease the commitment to marriage and traditional family structures among non same-sex couples, or that same-sex marriage is harmful to children.<sup>29</sup>

All of these cases are sociologically complex, and there can be no simple causal explanation for the epistemic behavior in question. Obviously, a range of other factors besides epistemic alienation figure prominently here, including, for example, naked political strategizing (unattached altogether from concerns with what is true or what is good for society) or simple ignorance. Nonetheless, each is a case in which the perception among some that their values are being swept aside by a politically biased policy elite appears to have played a potent role in sustaining the falsehoods and misrepresentations in question. In the case of healthcare reform, many opponents apparently fear that the policy science behind Obama's proposals is skewed by

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah Palin posted this claim on her Facebook page on August 7, 2009, and was probably more effective than anyone else in popularizing it.

<sup>29</sup> For a good overview of the relevant social science, see "American Psychological Association: Amici Curiae Brief, *in Re Marriage Cases*," 2007. Accessed at: [http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/courts/supreme/highprofile/documents/Amer\\_Psychological\\_Assn\\_Amicus\\_Curiae\\_Brief.pdf](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/courts/supreme/highprofile/documents/Amer_Psychological_Assn_Amicus_Curiae_Brief.pdf).

the desire to supplant important forms of individualism and freedom with a “socialist” scheme of values. And on the question of same-sex marriage, many see the legal institutionalization of same-sex unions as an attack on traditional family values which, in their view, are at the core of a good society. The frequent presumption, again, is that relevant psychological and sociological studies are driven by liberal bias.<sup>30</sup>

All epistemic communities must secure the good faith cooperation of their members and, in that respect, they must all manage in various ways the perceptions of their members that they are, speaking generically, being well treated by the other members of those communities. But epistemic alienation presents a unique problem in the political case for two reasons. The first concerns conditions (i)-(iv) above: political questions are cases of complexity, high stakes, conflicting values, and bad incentives. The second concerns the point, noted earlier, that membership in the political community is enormously broad and is not governed by epistemically relevant criteria. This is what I dubbed the “radical epistemic inclusiveness” of liberal democracies. In most epistemic communities, irresponsible inquiry can be effectively managed both by excluding individuals when they violate critical norms and by propagating a commitment to those norms through the training processes that secure admission to the

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<sup>30</sup> It is worth explicitly acknowledging here the obvious fact that the examples I have chosen reflect my own political orientation on these matters. Nonetheless, I have chosen them because they seem to me be the best examples of the phenomenon in question (epistemic alienation) that is available in contemporary politics, and not because they advance my personal political views. I should emphasize that the left is not immune to epistemic alienation, and (important parts of) the discussions surrounding genetically modified foods and free trade agreements, for example, would also serve as apt illustrations of it.

community (an obvious example would be Ph.D. training in the sciences). Given the radical epistemic inclusiveness of liberal democracies, however, the possibility of implementing such tactics is limited. While the political community can make efforts to publicly promote particular epistemic norms, and while it can exercise modest measures to censure epistemic violators (through reputational sanctions, for example), so long as all citizens are entitled to equal political powers and liberties, they will be in a position to substantially impede responsible public inquiry, at least given sufficient numbers.

For this reason, liberal democratic societies are places in which unwarranted perceptions of epistemic unreliability must be managed with unique care and with attention to a uniquely diverse range of inquirers. I will now try to establish that LPJ can be seen as a social technology<sup>31</sup> ideally suited for precisely this purpose, thus establishing its distinctive social-epistemic value.

## 5. Credibility Monitoring and the Liberal Principle of Justification

When we must depend on others in the formation of our beliefs, we have an abiding interest in developing the capacity to identify reliable and unreliable speakers, or what we might call *credibility monitoring*.<sup>32</sup> Epistemic trust is of course closely tied to credibility monitoring because the better our ability to identify reliable and unreliable speakers, the more we are entitled to judgments about their reliability. I propose that we should think of the strenuous reasoning implied by LPJ as a social practice that vitally enhances our collective capacity for

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<sup>31</sup> I borrow this phrase from Philip Kitcher, who employs it (in a different context) at various points in his (2011).

<sup>32</sup> I have loosely adopted this terminology from Goldberg 2011.

credibility monitoring and, in this way, greatly enhances our ability to sustain broad epistemic trust in the political context.

To defend that claim, let us begin by abstracting away from the various complexities that arise in the context of political deliberation. Consider a case in which you assert the surprising claim that  $p$ . Somewhat dubious, I ask why you believe that  $p$ , upon which you present me with several  $p$ -supporting considerations of which I had not been aware. I judge those considerations to be decisive and thus come to accept that  $p$ . This scenario is so mundane that it is barely worth spelling out except that it illustrates the most primitive function of our reason-giving practices: assuaging doubts about credibility under circumstances in which default or blind deference would be epistemically inappropriate. In a context where epistemic reliability were never in doubt, or in which we were all epistemically self-sufficient, the demand for reasons would play a negligible or at least far more peripheral role in our epistemic practices. But when we must rely on others, and when reasonable questions about competence and sincerity crop up, reason-giving becomes essential because the reasons that others give for their claims generally offer us uniquely good evidence of whether they should be treated as credible. Reason-giving provides such evidence, at the very least, by giving us access to supporting considerations of which we would otherwise have been unaware.

But there is a further respect in which reason-giving enables credibility monitoring, and that concerns, not the truth or falsehood of individual claims but, rather, the more general good faith and competence of a speaker over the course of an exchange. Deliberators who repeat themselves in the face of significant objections, who consistently appeal to false premises, who employ logical fallacies, or who appeal to sources of evidence not recognized as credible by competent peers, betray bad deliberative character, i.e., their unreliability as partners in inquiry.

The social imperative to offer reasons makes this sort of unreliability particularly difficult (though not impossible) to conceal.

These observations connect in an obvious way with the problem of epistemic alienation. The reasonable worry that the assertions of others are driven by political bias thrives in a space where questions are difficult and the motivations of others unclear. The public display of reasons not only provides important evidence of the truth or falsehood of a claim, but also of motivations. Thus, one of the best markers of political bias lies in the way agents' move through the space of reasons: How do they respond to evidence at odds with their political position? Do they appeal to epistemic authorities that are broadly recognized among competent peers, or do they appeal to sources whose authority is only recognized by those who share their political orientation? Do they acknowledge tenuous assumptions as such? The practice of public reasoning forces information of this type into a forum where it can be scrutinized by others. That does not provide a cure-all for political dogmatism and other forms of bad faith. It does nonetheless mean that agents have a means of keeping tabs on one another, reducing the space of doubt in which unwarranted epistemic alienation thrives.

The obvious limitation of all this is that, as noted earlier, the issues involved in political deliberation are far too complex and numerous for any individual to competently give or evaluate the many reasons bearing on policy issues. In the case of politics, individuals have neither the competence nor the time to monitor directly more than a sliver of their epistemic environment. And that, indeed, is an important part of the reason that doubts about the reliability of others are epistemically appropriate. For this reason, we must think about how the responsibility for monitoring inquirers can be broadly distributed across the political community so as to entitle individuals to trust even when their monitoring capacities are extremely limited.

Thus, Sandy Goldberg has recently highlighted the significance of what he dubs “distributed credibility monitoring,” which occurs when the epistemic status of beliefs received through testimony depend on the role that third parties – i.e., agents other than the speaker and hearer involved – play in identifying non-credible claims.<sup>33</sup> In one of his examples, a child who is unable to discriminate reliably between credible and non-credible testimony can nonetheless acquire testimonial knowledge given the presence of a discerning third party (e.g., a parent) who would dissuade the child from accepting claims in the event that they were untrustworthy.<sup>34</sup> On a broader social scale, the general (and adequate) presence in one’s epistemic environment of reliable third party “monitors” can entitle one to accept testimony across a broad range of epistemic domains, even when one has little or no competence to assess the credibility of a testimonial source. Given sufficiently widespread monitoring, one acquires entitlement to testimony via the warranted assumption that *if* a claim were unreliable, it *would* have been identified as such by others in one’s epistemic environment. Moreover, if one knows that one inhabits an epistemic environment of sufficiently widespread monitoring, one is much more likely to have confidence, as a matter of fact, that testimony from putative authorities is in fact reliable.

In a case like the healthcare reform debate, it is principally economists who must assess economic claims, lawyers who must assess legal claims, philosophers (in some very broad sense of the word) who must evaluate appeals to fundamental normative concepts (liberty or justice, for example), etc. The path to individuals’ epistemic trust proceeds indirectly. In liberal societies the diverse experts who figure so prominently in public deliberation are themselves

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<sup>33</sup> Goldberg 2011

<sup>34</sup> Goldberg 2011, p. 117

obliged to display the reasons for their beliefs to epistemic peers. Authority figures are in this way situated within a complex network of accountability: each individual is monitored by many others, who are themselves monitored by still others, and so forth. Institutional endorsements of competence that reflect the judgments of large groups of epistemic peers – such as university degrees, professional awards and certifications, and peer-reviewed publication – thereby provide the non-expert with a kind of second-hand capacity to monitor the reliability of her epistemic environment.

In this respect, citizens gain a form of epistemic trust that is placed, not in the tendencies and capacities of any individual inquirer, but rather in a system of social organization that adjudicates among complex knowledge claims, identifies epistemic authority figures, and takes in available evidence.<sup>35</sup> I will call this *systemic trust*. The kind of system that I have in mind is perhaps best exemplified by the natural-scientific community, which relies on an elaborate and standardized network of institutions to identify authoritative claims and individuals: the academic bodies that issue credentials, the editorial boards that peer-review articles, the protocols that govern experimentation, and the journals that disseminate results. When individuals rely on natural-scientific theories in making judgments, they place their confidence, not merely in the particular person or text providing them with natural-scientific information, but also in this larger network of institutions that certifies that particular source as authoritative.

In the case of political epistemology, it is not one tightly unified system of institutions that is relevant, but many discrete systems that are loosely related. Such systems would include, not only the academic and scientific systems that figure most prominently in the certification of

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<sup>35</sup> Similarly, see Baurmann and Brennan 2009, pp. 181-182 on the significance of “trust networks.”

most technical knowledge in liberal societies, but also the set of civic and political institutions – deliberative bodies, legal forums, journalistic organizations, etc. – that function in the evaluation and dissemination of politically significant claims. By the time an individual deliberator is asked to form a judgment about something like healthcare reform, the relevant concerns have already been synthesized, filtered, and critiqued many times over within the various systems just enumerated. The possibility of participating in this debate with any kind of epistemic confidence, at that point, depends less on our capacity to evaluate directly any particular deliberator or set of claims than on our ability to develop justifiable confidence in the epistemic systems functioning around us.

The crucial point about LPJ, then, is this: when all are obliged to display their reasons for belief with full publicity, and to address all reasonable concerns as they arise, a community's resources for distributed credibility monitoring are maximized across all social groups. That is, holding the evaluative competence of all groups fixed, each social group, identified by salient and overlapping clusters of value and interest, is in the best position it could be in to assume that someone among them is competently monitoring the reliability of their epistemic environment. It entitles them to the assumption that *if* a claim/inquirer/institution were unreliable, then it *would* have been identified as such. That greatly enhances the entitlement of each individual to the presumption that widely recognized epistemic authorities are reliable and works against the presumption of political bias.

To appreciate the distinctive virtues of LPJ, it is worth contrasting them with the epistemic virtues most prominently associated with liberalism. Most famously, Mill argues in *On Liberty* that liberalism's commitment to freedom of speech, thought, and association enables a robust contestation of ideas that allows societies more effectively to criticize harmful (and

false) social orthodoxies, to introduce valuable new truths, to gain from the cross-pollination of ideas, and to improve our understanding of truths already accepted.<sup>36</sup> Building on Mill’s original arguments, Allen Buchanan has emphasized two further features of liberal society that contribute to its epistemic virtue: first, the relatively strong role that epistemic merit plays in the identification of experts which is embodied most forcefully, on his view, in the ideal of “careers open to talents”; and, second, its egalitarianism, embodied most forcefully, on his view, in the commitment to intersubjective justification and democratic mechanisms of policy-making.<sup>37</sup> In virtue of their relatively meritocratic nature, Buchanan argues, liberal societies achieve greater epistemic efficiency through a “rational division of labor” and reduce the risks of relying on untrustworthy sources of knowledge.<sup>38</sup> And in virtue of their egalitarianism, he argues, liberal societies foster a sense among all citizens that they are competent to challenge authorities and, at the same time, reduce the tendency of individuals to dismiss the claims of others simply in virtue of their social status.<sup>39</sup>

Whereas Mill’s concerns about speech revolve principally around its restrictedness, LPJ embodies a conception of speech, not only as free, but also as a particular kind of cooperative social exchange, one oriented around the common aim of truth. That is because the normative constraints of reason-giving are designed precisely to minimize the social display of considerations that do not bear on truth and maximize the display of those that do. Thus, by their very nature, justificatory practices rule out, for example, brute appeals to solidarity, the

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<sup>36</sup> Mill 2002

<sup>37</sup> Buchanan 2004

<sup>38</sup> Buchanan 2004, pp. 110-117

<sup>39</sup> Buchanan 2004, pp. 117-120

demonization of interlocutors, or threats of force. At the same time, as we have seen, reasoning is a practice that by its nature forces into the public forum a great deal of information bearing on agents' epistemically relevant capacities, dispositions, motivations, and attitudes. LPJ thus has a relentless tendency to make agents' epistemically significant properties objects of public scrutiny, and that is the basis for some important contrasts with the liberal institutions cited by Mill and Buchanan.

In this respect, notice that, as much as speech enables the airing of truth and the criticism of falsehood, it also allows the airing of cant, misrepresentation, and propaganda. The freedom to speak does not ensure honesty, forthrightness, or competence, just as the freedom to make good criticisms does not ensure that these will be taken seriously in the public forum. "Protest" itself need not offer rational considerations bearing on truth and, likewise, the targets of protest are not obliged by any norm of free speech or thought to respond with such considerations. These observations are very much to the point for our purposes, since epistemic alienation both arises from the perception that speech is being used to advance falsehoods, and frequently involves retaliation through a similar misuse of speech. When some will not make themselves accountable for the truth of their claims, the rational incentive of others to do so is greatly diminished. LPJ thus embodies a distinctive model of speech according to which we will agree to make ourselves maximally accountable contingent on others doing likewise. It is that sometimes fragile contract – in which everyone has reasonable confidence that everyone else is being held accountable – that is crucial to sustaining an epistemically healthy speech environment as opposed merely to a forum in which contestation thrives.

Much as the epistemic advantages of free speech are easily undermined by perceptions of its abuse, the ideals of meritocracy and egalitarianism that Buchanan cites can easily backfire

when doubts arise about whether they are being upheld. Notably, epistemic alienation is frequently grounded in the belief that the processes governing entry to positions of epistemic authority are distorted by conscious or unconscious bias toward a political agenda. One recent example of this has been the complaint in the U.S. that the academy is systematically biased against conservative scholars in competition for jobs and publication.<sup>40</sup> This particular case aside, as a general matter, skepticism about the social systems that award epistemic authority is hardly inappropriate given the substantial links that have often persisted between such systems and social hierarchies (e.g., of race, class, and gender).<sup>41</sup> And the prospect of epistemic alienation is, indeed, closely tied to such skepticism. Indeed, in the examples of epistemic alienation given earlier, opponents of the relevant policy initiatives believe that their credibility is being dismissed without warrant. Their sense of equal status then functions both to enhance their sense of indignation, and to motivate the kind of cynically disingenuous deliberation that undermines public inquiry. These are cases in which epistemic alienation appears to be fueled, rather than defeated, by the meritocratic and egalitarian ideals that Buchanan cites. In general terms, the point is that the achievement of an egalitarian, meritocratic society is not enough in itself; it is crucial that social systems display the realization of these virtues in a particularly public way.

LPJ is not a comprehensive solution for unwarranted doubt about the virtues of social-epistemic systems. Nonetheless, in a society committed to the liberal practice of constant and ostentatious reason-giving, the processes and criteria which anoint epistemic authorities are

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the prominent campaign of conservative activist David Horowitz to combat liberal bias in the academy by creating an “academic bill of rights.”

<sup>41</sup> Fricker 2007, Harding 2006, Shapin 1995

themselves part of the systems that earn social trust through the distribution of credibility monitoring across all social groups. Like any other part of that system, these processes and criteria must be defended by appeal to reasons, and are therefore made open to competent public evaluation. Egalitarian attitudes, meanwhile, are revealed in important ways through the reason-giving process in the same way that other aspects of an agent's motivations, biases, and competence are revealed. Although being a racist is compatible with giving reasons, for example, the racist is likely to have difficulty defending her views (on relevant matters) without making some appeal to reasons of a conspicuously, or only thinly veiled, racist sort. As Buchanan notes, the liberal ideals of universal justification and democratic participation embody a conception of each as worthy to challenge the claims of authorities.<sup>42</sup> But, more than that, the practice of justification itself yields valuable information about whether, in fact, we are being treated as worthy. In that respect, when reliability is achieved, LPJ minimizes the space in which warranted doubt may arise.

In Section Four, I argued that social epistemology, in the political case, displays the essential features of a prisoner's dilemma. Specifically I noted, first, that for at least modestly self-interested agents, default skepticism about the reliability of other members of their epistemic community is epistemically rational. Second, I noted that, given such skepticism, the deliberate violation of epistemic norms is often rational given the enormous stakes of political debate. The solution to this prisoner's dilemma is, therefore, not merely the cultivation of reliability across the political community, but a social technology that allows agents to gain warranted confidence of one another's reliability. I have argued that LPJ plays that role as a mechanism through which agents continuously maximize public information about their epistemic competence and

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<sup>42</sup> Buchanan 2004, pp. 117-118

sincerity. When such information is continuously available for all to scrutinize, each is in a position of warranted relative confidence that violations of epistemic responsibility by others will be detected. In such circumstances, at least one important reason for being unreliable is defeated, and rational cooperation in inquiry becomes more viable.

## 6. Conclusion

I will close by acknowledging some of the important limitations of my analysis and highlighting some further directions for inquiry. One issue concerns the status of the arguments given here. The very general claim that LPJ fulfills necessary conditions for warranted epistemic trust in the political context is grounded in a range of broad assumptions about human psychology and behavior. Though these assumptions seem to me to be highly plausible, they are hardly unassailable, and it is likely that empirical analysis will reveal important limitations in the conditions under which LPJ plays the indispensable and valuable role that I claim it plays.

Thus, most importantly, my arguments ride on the supposition that the social and psychological dynamics of exchanging reasons are at least compatible with, and under the right conditions can promote, citizens' edification. James Fishkin's deliberative polling experiments provide the most clear cut experimental evidence that this is true (though there are obvious questions that concern the relationship between deliberation on this smaller scale and in a broader social context).<sup>43</sup> But there are many circumstances in which an exchange of reasons can hinder rather than promote edification as in, for example, the well known phenomenon of group polarization.<sup>44</sup> There are probably other important surprises in store. For example, it is

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<sup>43</sup> Fishkin 2009

<sup>44</sup> Sunstein 2002

possible that when citizens gain too much information about the reasons behind policy, they simply become overloaded and retreat to what is familiar. In that case, LPJ's essential contribution to public inquiry would be constrained by psychological thresholds for thoughtful information processing: perhaps the most reliable environment for inquiry is one in which the extent of public reason-giving is significant (where this requires further specification) but not maximal. Relatedly, there is a growing body of research that explores, through formal modeling, the structures of communities that tend best to foster epistemic success.<sup>45</sup> One prominent result of this work is that, under many conditions, an excess of communication within a community can hinder epistemic progress by reducing the pursuit of potentially valuable alternatives to the best confirmed research agenda.<sup>46</sup> That suggests, once again, the possibility that there is a cap on just how universal and ostentatious reason-giving should be.

A further question for empirical investigation concerns the extent to which reliable judgments about sincerity and competence can be made without implementing the rather demanding practice of exchanging reasons. For example, there might be relatively simple heuristics that provide adequate information about who is trustworthy, at least under many circumstances.<sup>47</sup> If these heuristics are good enough, then it is possible that LPJ is not necessary after all for warranted epistemic trust, or at least that the crucial role it plays is far more restricted than this paper suggests.

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<sup>45</sup> E.g., Grim and Kokalis 2004, Grim et al. 2005, Zollman 2010, 2007. I thank an anonymous referee for highlighting the significance of this work to the discussion here.

<sup>46</sup> Zollman 2007

<sup>47</sup> Goldman 2001, Lupia and McCubbins 1998

A further qualification concerns the distinction between LPJ's necessity and its sufficiency. I have tried to establish that LPJ fulfills crucial necessary conditions to establish warrant for epistemic trust in a normal, pluralistic political context. The question of what will, in fact, tend to cause epistemic trust and reliable epistemic behavior is distinct from this. A broad body of empirical work suggests that factors such as economic equality,<sup>48</sup> generalized optimism,<sup>49</sup> and levels of oxytocin in the brain,<sup>50</sup> among other things, are crucial in fostering trust. As the preceding paragraphs already suggest, there is no question that real attempts to implement liberal justification must be aided by a psychological, sociological, and perhaps neurological perspective on human behavior. In characterizing LPJ, I noted that the ideal admits of a broad range of concrete interpretations, and all of these empirical considerations bear essentially on what a good interpretation would look like.

A corollary of this point about the relevance of psychology and sociology to epistemic trust is that, as I suggested earlier, LPJ is not a panacea for social epistemic pathology. Indeed, the very examples of epistemic alienation that I gave occur in the context of a substantial, if flawed, public exchange of reasons. Even if that exchange were less flawed than it is in contemporary liberal societies, bad faith, dogmatism, and brute ignorance would remain vital social forces. Finally, even when warranted trust in epistemic authorities is at its strongest, there will often remain substantial discord among experts about the issues in question. Occupying a healthy social-epistemic environment therefore does not absolve non-experts of the responsibility

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<sup>48</sup> Rothstein and Uslaner 2005

<sup>49</sup> Uslaner 2002

<sup>50</sup> Kosfeld et al. 2005

for active critical evaluation in deciding whom to trust,<sup>51</sup> just as it does not foreclose the possibility that trust will be misplaced.

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<sup>51</sup> See Anderson 2011 for valuable discussion of how non-expert citizens might go about such evaluation.

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